



Command and Control in the "Great Retreat" of 1914: The Disintegration of the British Cavalry Division

Nikolas Gardner

The Journal of Military History, Vol. 63, No. 1. (Jan., 1999), pp. 29-54.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?&sici=0899-3718%28199901%2963%3A1%3C29%3ACACIT%22%3E2.0.CO%3B2-E>

The Journal of Military History is currently published by Society for Military History.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/smh.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is an independent not-for-profit organization dedicated to and preserving a digital archive of scholarly journals. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Command and Control in the “Great Retreat” of 1914: The Disintegration of the British Cavalry Division



Nikolas Gardner

Introduction

IN the annals of British military history, few groups are remembered more affectionately than the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) of 1914. Thrown into the path of the advancing German Army in mid-August, Sir John French’s “Old Contemptibles” maintained their legendary poise and professionalism for two weeks under the severe strain of continued retreat. After checking the enemy at Mons and Le Cateau, the British eventually joined the French in turning the tables on their erstwhile pursuers, chasing the Germans back to the line of the River Aisne, where the belligerents settled into the grim monotony of trench warfare.

Historians have focused in particular on the “Great Retreat” of late August, when exhausted British soldiers performed their greatest feats of heroism. In this brief period of mobile operations, the role of mounted troops remained quite significant, and the British cavalry have thus shared in the acclaim accorded the BEF as a whole. In John Terraine’s account of the first weeks of the war, *Mons: The Retreat to Victory*, the author states glowingly: “It is pointless to single out any arm for special praise; the infantry won glory that can never be taken from them; but the artillery and cavalry also maintained standards almost unbelievably high.” More recently, Stephen Badsey has exalted the performance of the mounted arm in particular, attributing the success of the retreat to the “massive superiority” of the British cavalry over its German counterpart. As he states: “The ability of the cavalry to dominate its enemies in scouting

and patrol work prevented the Germans from pressing the BEF during the retreat from Mons, and in fact made the whole manoeuvre possible.”¹

Despite this overall impression of proficiency, the operational role of the British cavalry in this stage of the war has been largely buried beneath the accolades of Terraine, Badsey, and other historians. Significantly, however, in accounts of the actions at Mons, on 23 August 1914, and Le Cateau, three days later, the cavalry is credited with only minor contributions. Even during the aftermath of the battles, when it ought to have been of paramount importance in covering the retreating BEF, Sir Edmund Allenby’s Cavalry Division is conspicuous in its absence from most chronicles of the period.

While the role of the division remains largely obscured in accounts of the “Great Retreat,” studies of British cavalry commanders suggest that it experienced serious operational difficulties in late August 1914. In *Imperial Warrior*, his recent biography of Allenby, Lawrence James relates: “The retreat began in the early hours of 24 August, and almost immediately Allenby discovered that he had lost control over nearly all his brigades.”² Even when the division was able to maintain some degree of cohesion, it seemingly suffered from ineptitude at its upper levels. In his study of Sir Hubert Gough, commander of the 3rd Cavalry Brigade in August 1914, Anthony Farrar-Hockley recounts two successive command blunders during the retreat, stating: “The whole Cavalry Division had been deployed without any of the brigade commanders knowing the scheme of operations. In withdrawal they had exposed the flank of another division to enemy attack. Was this how they were meant to operate?”³

Although neither of these studies attempt a comprehensive explanation of the operations of the division, both imply a reality much more complex than that portrayed in existing accounts. It would appear that the flattering interpretation advanced by authors such as Terraine and Badsey is not sufficient to comprehend the experiences of the cavalry during the retreat. Linking the organizational and intellectual development of the mounted arm prior to the First World War with its operational performance in 1914, the following account will demonstrate that the “Great Retreat” laid bare important deficiencies of the British Cavalry Division. Hampered by its awkward size, the lack of familiarity of its brigades

1. John Terraine, *Mons: The Retreat to Victory* (London: Leo Cooper, 1991), 217; Stephen Badsey, “Cavalry and the Development of Breakthrough Doctrine,” in Paddy Griffith, ed., *British Fighting Methods in the Great War* (London and Portland, Ore.: Frank Cass, 1996), 147.

2. Lawrence James, *Imperial Warrior: The Life and Times of Field-Marshal Viscount Allenby, 1861–1936* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1993), 59.

3. Anthony Farrar-Hockley, *Goughie* (London: Hart-Davis, MacGibbon, 1975), 125. See also, The Marquess of Anglesey, *A History of the British Cavalry, 1816–1919*, vol. 7, *The Curragh Incident and the Western Front, 1914* (London: Leo Cooper, 1996).

in operating as a division, and the inexperience of its staff, the division rapidly began to lose cohesion under the intense strain of the retreat. In this situation, the professional ethos of the British cavalry, stressing intuitive decision making and independent action, came to the fore among its brigade commanders, leading to the effective disintegration of the division as an operational unit.

The Cavalry Before the War

Conflicts since the Crimean War, with their growing reliance on fire-power, had increasingly indicated the eclipse of the *arme blanche*, “the warhorse and ‘cold steel’ of lance and sabre,” which had traditionally comprised the principal role of cavalry. Nonetheless, in the years leading up to the First World War, the mounted arm remained easily the most prestigious in the British Army. While part of this fashionability can be attributed to its expense, which largely limited membership in its officer corps to the upper classes and the aristocracy, the cavalry’s celebrated past contributed as well. As Brian Bond has observed, “Over its real historical achievements there had accumulated an aura of glamour and romance, epitomized by the half-serious boast that the cavalry’s role in battle was to add tone to what otherwise would be an unseemly brawl.”⁴

Among officers, this prestige was expressed through a somewhat ephemeral quality known as the cavalry spirit. Sir John French, the most celebrated cavalry commander of the South African war, provided a partial definition in 1904, explaining:

It is difficult to define what one means by the “cavalry spirit”, but it is a power which is *felt* and realized by those who have served much with the arm. Its attributes are “élan,” “dash,” a fixed determination always to take the offensive and secure the initiative.⁵

In discussing the “fire versus shock” debate which smouldered in the British Cavalry between 1902 and 1914, historians have focused almost exclusively on this aspect of the cavalry spirit.⁶ The intellectual milieu of the mounted arm, however, was comprised of more than simply a fixation

4. Brian Bond, “Doctrine and Training in the British Cavalry, 1870–1914,” in Michael Howard, ed., *The Theory and Practice of War: Essays Presented to Captain B. H. Liddell Hart* (London: Cassell, 1965), 97, 100.

5. The Marquess of Anglesey, *A History of the British Cavalry, 1816 to 1919*, vol. 4 (London: Leo Cooper, 1986), 408.

6. The “fire versus shock” debate concerned the relative emphasis placed on rifle fire and traditional *arme blanche* tactics in cavalry training between the Boer War and the First World War. For a detailed discussion, see Bond, “Doctrine and Training in the British Cavalry”; Anglesey, *A History of the British Cavalry*, vol. 4; or Edward Spiers, “The British Cavalry, 1902–1914,” *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research*, Summer 1979.

on the offensive. An important element in the self-image of the cavalry was its conceived superiority to the other arms. Perceived to be socially and intuitively a cut above their counterparts in the infantry and artillery, cavalry officers were not subjected to the same standards of discipline and training. This was manifested in a social system “whose object was to ensure that officers spent a minimum of time on regimental duties and a maximum on hunting and other congenial pursuits.”⁷ In more serious operational matters, this liberty extended to decision making as well, as qualities such as “dash” and “élan” could not be stifled by adherence to preconceived plans. Sir John French typified this attitude. According to Sir James Edmonds, Official Historian of the British Army in the First World War, “[h]e prided himself on never thinking ahead, and as a true cavalryman, as he boasted, decided on his action by intuition, on the spur of the moment.”⁸

In light of Edmonds’s derisive tendencies in his memoirs and private correspondence, it is advisable to treat his characterizations of British commanders with some caution. Whatever the accuracy of this particular description of French, however, it suggests that intuitive decision making was a tendency closely associated with cavalry commanders. Other observers expressed similar sentiments, noting that this inclination was often accompanied by an emphasis on independence and even a resentment of orders from above. Captain L. A. E. Price-Davies, serving as a liaison officer between General Headquarters (GHQ) and Hubert Gough’s 2d Cavalry Division in October 1914, commented on this trait in a letter to his wife. “All the staffs I come across are so nice to me,” he related. “[But] in some ways Hubert’s staff [are] not so nice but they are always rather busy & fussed & Cavalry are always rather independent cusses & don’t care much for people from outside & object to superior commanders & staffs & such like.”⁹ Thus, beyond the tendency toward “élan,” “dash,” and offensive action, the British cavalry possessed a professional ethos which emphasized intuitive decision making and independence of action in the field. These traits would surface under the strain of continued retreat in 1914.

While this professional outlook proved tenacious in the years before 1914, the cavalry was not immersed in its own aura to the point of doctri-

7. Bond, “Doctrine and Training in the British Cavalry,” 100; Brian Gardner, *Allenby of Arabia: Lawrence’s General* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1966), 62.

8. James Edmonds Memoir, Edmonds Papers, III/8, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives (LHCMA), King’s College, London.

9. L. A. E. Price-Davies to Mrs. Price-Davies, 17 October 1914, L. A. E. Price-Davies Papers, Imperial War Museum (IWM), London. On the independent mindset of British cavalry officers in 1914, see Archibald Home, *The Diary of a World War I Cavalry Officer*, ed. Diana Brisecoe (Tunbridge Wells, England: Costello, 1985), 42.

nal immobility. Even the *arme blanche*, that cornerstone of the cavalry mystique, was not safe from the incursions of a “New School” of reform-minded officers, who perceived the growing importance of firepower.¹⁰ Lord Roberts, Commander-in-Chief from 1900 until the abolition of the office in 1904, was pivotal in forcing the adoption of the rifle. In March 1903, his Army Order No. 39 directed that the rifle would henceforth become the principal weapon of the cavalry, effectively reducing the lance and sword, its traditional arms, to ceremonial status.¹¹

Proponents of shock action fought back fiercely, however, pointing to the continued predominance of the lance among European cavalries, as well as the abysmal performance of the Russian cavalry, trained as mounted infantry, in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–5. Led by Sir John French and Sir Douglas Haig, they mounted what has been termed a “cavalry counter-reformation” in the years after the end of Roberts’s tenure in 1904. The lance was thus restored in 1909, to be carried by Lancer regiments, “on guard, during training, at manoeuvres, and when so ordered, on field service.”¹² By the outset of the war, the two sides had come to something of a compromise, expressed in the 1912 edition of *Cavalry Training*, which remained virtually unchanged over the next two years. As the manual stated:

The rifle endows cavalry with great independence in war, numerous situations will occur when it can be used with greater effect than the sword or lance. But a bold leader will find frequent opportunities for mounted attack which will produce more rapid and decisive results than can be gained by even the most skilful use of the rifle.¹³

This tentative embrace of the rifle was accompanied by efforts in other areas to improve the versatility of the mounted arm. Although like most cavalry officers, Allenby remained enamoured with the charge, as Inspector-General of Cavalry, he introduced a syllabus in 1910 which included training in such uncharted areas as marksmanship, reconnaissance, covering an army in retreat, and alternate marching and riding to allay fatigue in horses. Many officers remained recalcitrant in the face of these innovations, but among a few there appeared a glimmering of comprehension of the realities of fire power. Sir Henry de B. de Lisle, commander of the 2d Cavalry Brigade in August 1914, took the unprecedented step of training his rather resentful troops in the selection and

10. Anglesey, *A History of the British Cavalry*, 4:377–423. See also Bond, “Doctrine and Training in the British Cavalry.”

11. Bond, “Doctrine and Training in the British Cavalry,” 111.

12. Ibid., 115. For an account of the “cavalry counter-reformation,” see Gerard DeGroot, *Douglas Haig: 1861–1928* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1988), chap. 5.

13. Anglesey, *A History of the British Cavalry*, 4:401.

preparation of trenches, a task considered quite beneath the cavalry.¹⁴ Thus, by 1914, through the efforts of a few stubborn reformers, the cavalry had expanded its repertoire to include a variety of skills which would prove beneficial in the impending conflict. These endeavours had paid dividends by the outset of the First World War. In his chronicle of 1914, Frederick Maurice commented that the British "were easily first of the cavalries of Europe in dismounted work."¹⁵

It is important, however, not to overemphasize the impact of these innovations. To recognize the dismounted superiority of the British cavalry to European cavalries which continued to rely almost exclusively on the charge does not necessarily concede its overall expertise. Indeed, while they may have become relatively proficient with the rifle, the British too remained reluctant to abandon the *arme blanche* in favour of newer tactics. As Stephen Badsey has acknowledged, the new tactical ideas "were difficult to explain to some of the more traditionally minded officers, and there were occasional (and entirely justified) complaints on exercise of cavalry trying to charge uphill against entrenched infantry."¹⁶ The continued primacy of the charge was reflected in the prewar training regimen of the mounted arm. Despite the efforts of Lord Roberts and others, in 1910, 80 percent of training time still was consumed by shock tactics, while rifle training and reconnaissance each received only 10 percent.¹⁷ Erskine Childers, a British military writer and proponent of cavalry reform, complained in a letter to Roberts: "Shock action, consigned to complete oblivion in South Africa and to equally complete oblivion in Manchuria, still holds first place in the training of the Cavalry soldier."¹⁸

The tenacity of the *arme blanche* and its defenders, combined with their inexperience in continental warfare, also influenced the structure of the British Cavalry Division, which was comprised of four brigades, one more than in an infantry division. Its increased size, as well as the greater mobility of cavalry, compounded the task of maintaining control over the division in a battle, but its suitability for shock action was deemed more important. As Edmonds related in a letter to Sir Archibald Wavell after the war:

I asked Haig in 1913, why there were 4 Brigades in the Cav Div, more than any one man could control, as the Germans had discovered. He

14. James, *Imperial Warrior*, 49; Sir Henry de Beauvoir de Lisle, "My Narrative of the Great German War," De Lisle Papers, LHCMA.

15. Frederick Maurice, *Forty Days in 1914* (London: Constable, 1921), 74–75.

16. Badsey, "Cavalry and the Breakthrough Doctrine," 146.

17. Anglesey, *A History of the British Cavalry*, 4:414.

18. Erskine Childers to Lord Roberts, cited in Spiers, "The British Cavalry, 1902–1914," 71.

replied “but you must have 4” “Why?” “*For the charge* : 2 brigades—first line, 1 in support & you must have a reserve!”¹⁹

Stephen Badsey has dismissed this account as “one of Edmonds’ stories,” contending that the unwieldy size of the division was in fact the result of prewar budgetary constraints which prevented the creation of a second divisional headquarters for the cavalry.²⁰ Financial considerations may indeed have prohibited the establishment of two separate divisions. They did not necessitate, however, that the lone Cavalry Division despatched to France in August 1914 would be comprised of four brigades. In total, five cavalry brigades were included in the initial contingent of the BEF, one of which served with Haig’s I Corps, independent of the Cavalry Division.²¹ To have attached another of the brigades to Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien’s II Corps would seem only logical, given that in all other respects the two corps were equal in strength. In addition, a Cavalry Division consisting of the remaining three brigades would have been more manageable under the strain of active operations.

It is evident, however, that such considerations were outweighed by the appeal of a division comprised of four brigades. This appeal was based largely on the justification offered by Haig in Edmonds’s account quoted above: the perceived effectiveness of four brigades in executing a charge *en masse*. Such a belief was not without historical precedent. During the South African War, French’s Cavalry Division, itself containing four brigades, had carried out a charge against the enemy at Klip Drift with spectacular success. This fleeting vindication of shock tactics left a lasting impression on British cavalry officers, among them French and his chief of staff at the time, Haig. In his biography of the latter, Gerard DeGroot remarks that Haig’s mind was “slammed shut” following the celebrated charge at Klip Drift.²²

Unfortunately, the British army had little practical experience which might have challenged this conviction. Since the Crimean War, the operations of the British cavalry had consisted largely of limited colonial

19. James Edmonds to Archibald Wavell, 17 June 1938, Allenby VI/I, Sir Edmund Allenby Papers, LHCMA.

20. Badsey, “Cavalry and the Development of Breakthrough Doctrine,” 147.

21. GHQ War Diary, 21 August 1914, WO 95/1, Public Record Office (PRO), Kew, London; Henry Wilson to Cavalry Division, 23 August 1914, 12.45 P.M., Cavalry Division War Diary, WO 95/1096, PRO. The 5th Cavalry Brigade, commanded by Phillip Chetwode, was not officially placed under the command of I Corps until the afternoon of 23 August, but had operated out of contact with Allenby’s division since the previous day. Even beforehand the GHQ War Diary clearly refers to the 5th Brigade as a separate entity from the Cavalry Division.

22. DeGroot, *Douglas Haig*, 112. For a description of French’s charge at Klip Drift, see Richard Holmes, *The Little Field-Marshal: Sir John French* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1981), 88–92.

engagements against poorly armed opponents, seldom requiring the use of formations larger than a single brigade. As a rare case in which a larger force was employed, the charge at Klip Drift had a disproportionate influence on the subsequent ideas of British cavalry officers regarding the feasibility of such operations in the future. Significantly, the Boer positions overwhelmed by French's cavalry had been held only by sparse lines of lightly armed troops. Against the vastly superior size and firepower of continental armies, however, the probability of maintaining the cohesion of such a large mounted formation was more doubtful. Although the French and German cavalries placed at least as much emphasis on the *arme blanche* as the British, their experiences in European conflicts had led them to adopt considerably smaller cavalry formations. In 1914, French and German cavalry divisions were comprised of only three brigades, each containing two regiments, while their British equivalent consisted of four brigades of three regiments each.

Given the rather unwieldy size of the British division, the ability of its brigades to coordinate their movements ought to have been of paramount concern. Unfortunately however, budgetary restrictions and the dispersion of the brigades throughout England and Ireland militated against their training as a division, with the result that they came together only twice between 1910 and the beginning of the war. In addition, while the British cavalry had mastered dismounted action to a greater extent than its European counterparts, unlike them, it had not experienced warfare on a scale which demonstrated the value of a permanent staff. As a result, the division that assembled in 1914 was a collection of "totally independent brigades which had practically never come together," directed by a staff with virtually no knowledge of "handling a mass of cavalry in the field." Even Allenby's chief of staff, John Vaughan, had no staff training.²³ Thus, despite the diversification of its tactical capabilities prior to the war, there remained in the British cavalry an attachment to the *arme blanche* and a lack of experience against continental opponents. In an atmosphere of financial constraint, these factors encumbered the unseasoned staff of the Cavalry Division with four brigades almost wholly unaccustomed to operating together.

Inexperience, tactical ill-preparedness, and an unsuitable force structure are serious difficulties for any military force. To some extent, however, all of the belligerents faced these problems at the outset of the First World War, and without additional factors complicating the situation, they were probably not insoluble. Unfortunately, the animosity between the Divisional Commander, Allenby, and his brigadiers, most notably Hubert Gough, was just such a complication.

23. Gardner, *Allenby of Arabia*, 70; George Barrow to Wavell, n.d., Allenby VI/I.

Edmund Allenby had made his reputation in South Africa as an effective, if unremarkable, cavalry commander. Between the wars, he had risen steadily, taking command of the 4th Cavalry Brigade in 1906, before being appointed Inspector-General of the Cavalry in 1910, a position which designated him as commander of the Cavalry Division in the event of mobilization. Although he had been reasonably popular in his days at the Staff College before the South African War, his personality became progressively more unpleasant as he advanced in rank. Always attentive to detail, as a brigade commander and later as Inspector-General of Cavalry, Allenby became known for his fastidiousness, insisting on adherence to even the most trivial regulations, such as the proper use of chin-straps by cavalrymen or the number of buttons on uniform sleeves.²⁴ Over the years, this often irrational obsession with rules became the object of ridicule within the British officer corps. After the war, Edmonds related the following episode, which apparently took place as Allenby, at the time commander of the 1st Army, and one of his corps commanders toured the trenches in his front. At one point, they came upon a dead soldier in a shell-hole, with neither his leather jerkin nor his helmet. This discovery led to the following exchange:

A[llenby]: Did I or did I not issue an order that no man should go up to the front trenches without a jerkin & a helmet? C.C.: Yes Sir! A: Then why has this man not got them on? C.C.: The man is dead sir. A: Did I or did I not issue an order etc. etc.”

This dialogue was apparently repeated several times before the procession moved on, with Allenby still muttering “Did I or did I not . . .”²⁵

Whether or not this episode reached the absurd lengths described by Edmonds, it serves to illustrate Allenby’s reputation for an obsessive concern with regulations. Even before the war, his meticulous nature had gained considerable notoriety within the cavalry. Equally infamous, however, were his spectacular tantrums when directives were ignored. One of these, in 1909, earned him the nickname “the Bull,” a title which replaced his earlier moniker “Apple Pie,” a reference to his penchant for neatness and order.²⁶ While many of his subordinates grew to respect and even admire him after prolonged service, those unaccustomed to Allenby’s fixation with regulations, and his propensity to fly into a rage at seemingly slight provocation, could not help but resent these traits. Allenby’s command style would likely have caused irritation in any branch

24. Gardner, *Allenby of Arabia*, 28, 45; Sir B. H. Liddell Hart, “Talk With Edmonds,” 7 June 1934, 11/1934/41, Liddell Hart Papers, LHCMA; Phillip-Howell to Wavell, 20 July, 1938, Allenby VI/I. See also, Hubert Gough, *Soldiering On* (London: Arthur Barker, 1954), 96.

25. Edmonds to Wavell, 28 June 1938, Allenby VI/I.

26. James, *Imperial Warrior*, 46.

of the army. In the cavalry, however, where the eschewal of chin-straps was representative of an attitude which held strict adherence to rules and regulations in little regard, it was inevitable that he would ruffle the feathers of his subordinates. Indeed, Allenby's reforms as Inspector-General, from his insistence on wearing chin-straps to his introduction of training in such nontraditional areas as dismounted action and covering retreats, met with considerable opposition. Thus, in 1914, the Cavalry was headed by "the most unpopular cavalry commander in memory."²⁷

It is unlikely that Allenby's personality quirks and attempts at innovation did anything to endear him to his four brigade commanders, C. J. Briggs, Henry de Lisle, Hubert Gough, and C. J. Bingham.²⁸ On none of them, however, did his personality grate more harshly than Gough, commander of the 3d Cavalry Brigade. While Allenby's fastidiousness and emphasis on regulations were something of an anomaly in the free-and-easy cavalry, Gough embodied to the core its ethos of lax discipline and independent decision making. Edward Beddington, who served under him before and during the First World War, related a prewar incident in his memoirs which exemplifies Gough's attitude:

It so happened that I was in command of "A" Squadron one day and brought it on to parade five minutes before time. Goughy appeared at 9.0am and had his trumpeter sound "Squadron Leader." We all galloped up and saluted, and he addressed us as follows. "Good morning Gentlemen. I noticed 1 squadron on parade this morning five minutes early. Please remember that it is better to be late rather than early. The former shows a sense of sturdy independence and no undue respect for higher authority, the latter merely shows womanish excitement and nervousness. Go back to your squadrons."²⁹

Allenby, it can safely be assumed, held punctuality in higher esteem, and on this and many other issues the opinions of the two officers were fundamentally opposed. They had apparently first become acquainted in South Africa when Allenby had led a column sent to rescue Gough's defeated detachment and its commander, who had escaped after being captured by the Boers. Gough's rash behaviour, which had contributed to the capture of his column, cannot have impressed the more cautious Allenby, and it seems the two did not get on well.³⁰ Between the wars, Gough also served for two years as Allenby's Chief Staff Officer when the latter held the post of Inspector-General of Cavalry. Having served in the same capacity under Haig, Allenby's predecessor, Gough had the

27. Gardner, *Allenby of Arabia*, 65.

28. Phillip-Howell to Wavell, 20 July 1938, Allenby VI/I.

29. E. H. Beddington, "My Life," 24–25, Sir Edward Beddington Papers, LHCMA.

30. Gardner, *Allenby of Arabia*, 49. See also Gough, *Soldiering On*, 82–88, for his account of this episode.

opportunity to compare the two, more often than not judging Allenby inferior. He was not wholly negative, acknowledging that Allenby, although “somewhat mentally lazy,” “accepted suggestions readily,” “was not afraid of responsibility,” and had “a strong element of generosity about him.”³¹ Even so, under the strain of operations, the divergent personalities of the two were likely to clash. Thus, while in the professional context of the cavalry, Allenby’s preoccupation with detail tended to cause friction with most subordinates, the fact that one of those subordinates adhered in the extreme to the independent and permissive philosophy of the arm further undermined the cohesion of the Cavalry Division. Combined with inexperience and a cumbersome force structure, this lack of harmony at the command level foreshadowed serious difficulties under the strain of operations.

The Cavalry Division Goes to War Mobilization and Deployment, 16–23 August

When war finally came in August 1914, the cavalry, along with the rest of the British Army, greeted it with calm resolve. Despite the potential for difficulties created by its size and the inexperience of its staff, the mobilization of the Cavalry Division proceeded smoothly, and Allenby, his chief staff officer, Colonel John Vaughan, and the rest of the divisional staff embarked across the Channel on 16 August. Once in France, they assembled the four brigades: the 1st, under Briggs; the 2d, under de Lisle; the 3d, under Gough; and the 4th, under Bingham. The individual brigades were comprised of three regiments, each regiment containing 477 mounted troopers and a machine gun section. In addition, attached to each brigade was a six-gun battery of the Royal Horse Artillery, which added firepower at the expense of mobility.³² Following its assembly, the Division moved towards the BEF’s assigned area of concentration, a “pear-shaped area between Maubeuge and Le Cateau, almost twenty-five miles long from north-east to south-west, and averaging ten miles wide.”³³ The cavalry was to deploy at the northeast end, linking with the French Fifth Army on the British right, although GHQ neglected to mention that this was the object of the cavalry’s advance.

31. Gough, *Soldiering On*, 95–97.

32. Composition of the Cavalry Division: 1st Brigade (Briggs)—2d Dragoon Guards (Queen’s Bays), 5th Dragoon Guards, 11th Hussars; 2d Brigade (de Lisle)—4th Dragoon Guards, 9th Lancers, 18th Hussars; 3d Brigade (Gough)—4th Hussars, 5th Lancers, 16th Lancers; 4th Brigade (Bingham)—Household Cavalry Regiment; 6th Dragoon Guards (Carabiniers), 3d Hussars. Anglesey, *A History of the British Cavalry*, 7:64–65.

33. James Edmonds, *History of the Great War: Military Operations, France and Belgium, 1914*, 3d ed. (London: Macmillan, 1933), 49.

Tension mounted as the division continued its march northward. Caught up in the excitement and novelty of active service in Europe, the cavalry regiments did not even think to ask the purpose of their movements.³⁴ As they approached the vicinity of Mons on 21 August, the trepidation of troops at the outset of a conflict was fuelled by intelligence reports indicating the approach of the enemy in considerable numbers. George Barrow, the Division's Intelligence Officer, had secured the use of a telephone at the railway station in Givry, and from there placed calls to stations to the north in hopes of determining the whereabouts of the German Army. By mid-afternoon, Barrow had discerned a steady advance of German troops to the west and southwest, with patrols reaching southwards towards Mons. While this information apparently had little impact on GHQ, apprehension grew in the Cavalry Division as the news leaked into the ranks, taking on a more menacing tone in the process.³⁵ As de Lisle recounts, the march "became somewhat disorganised owing to wild rumours of 50,000 Germans marching on Mons, 10 miles to our north." The enemy nonetheless remained concealed on the twenty-first, and a somewhat anxious Cavalry Division halted for the night south of Mons.

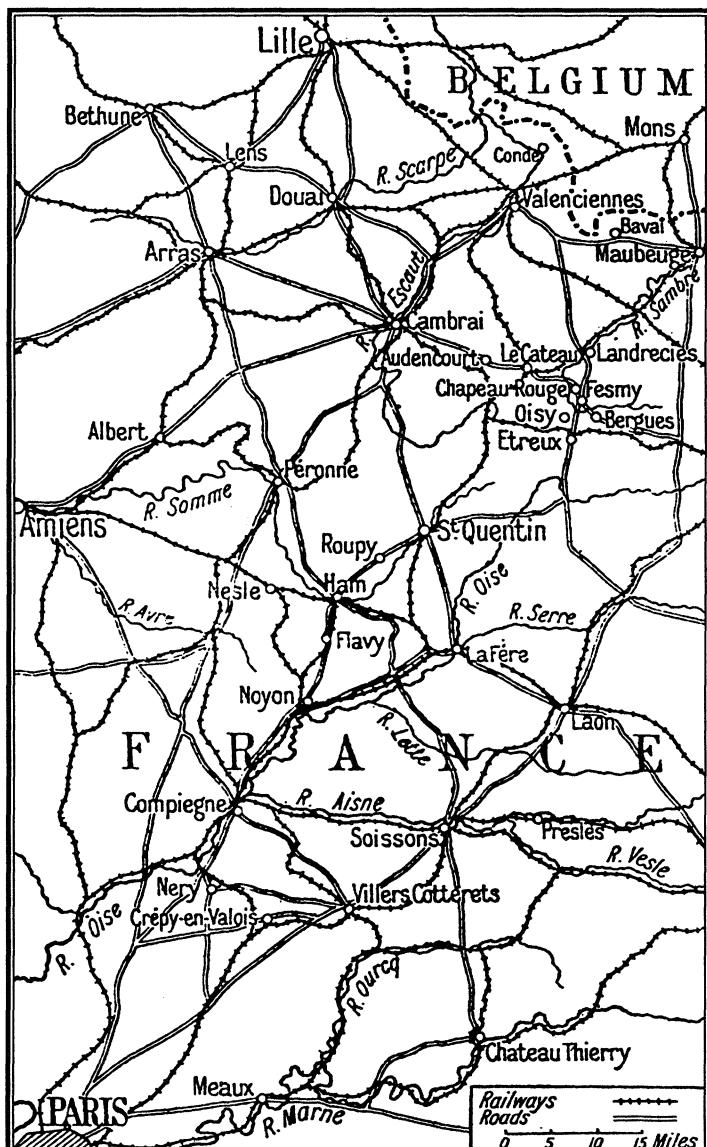
Early the next morning, however, German troops appeared, and British troops fired their first shots on the continent when a squadron of the 4th Dragoon Guards of de Lisle's 2d Brigade ambushed a German cavalry patrol between Mons and Soignies, taking three prisoners and killing or wounding one officer and six men. This episode quickly demonstrated to the British their tactical superiority over their adversaries. According to de Lisle, "The action was of considerable importance as it gained for our Cavalry a moral superiority which was never lost."³⁶

As the situation became more intelligible to GHQ, French and his staff decided that the Cavalry would be better deployed on the opposite flank of the BEF. Shortly afterwards, the division received orders to march across to the army's left flank. At 11.15 A.M., the leading brigade, the 4th, had already begun to move when divisional headquarters received word that Gough's 3d Brigade was engaged with German troops advancing southwards towards Bray. The entire division thus halted abruptly until the 3d Brigade managed to extricate itself. While the German advance was slow and their artillery fire inaccurate, it was early evening before

34. Farrar-Hockley, *Goughie*, 120.

35. Barrow to Wavell, n.d., Allenby VI/I; GHQ (Henry Wilson) to Cavalry Division, 21 August 1914, 12.45 P.M., Cavalry Division War Diary, WO 95/1096, PRO. After receiving Barrow's intelligence report, Wilson replied: "Information you have acquired and conveyed to C in C appears somewhat exaggerated."

36. De Lisle, "My Narrative," 22 August 1914.



Lines of Retreat from Mons. (Source: Arthur Conan Doyle, *The British Campaign in France and Flanders, 1914* [London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1916], 125.)

Gough began his retirement. This delay necessitated a night march of fifteen miles over paved roads, fatiguing for both horses and men, in order to reach the Army's left flank. It was thus a weary Cavalry Division which reached its billets between midnight and 2 A.M.³⁷

Fortunately, the morning of 23 August broke quietly for the cavalry. On their right, in succession, were the two divisions of the British II Corps, Major-General Charles Fergusson's 5 Division and Major-General Hubert Hamilton's 3 Division. On the twenty-third, Hamilton's division suffered considerable casualties as it bore the brunt of an attack by elements of at least five German divisions in the vicinity of Mons, in the first significant engagement of the war for the British. While fighting raged in the Mons salient, however, the left flank, where the cavalry was stationed south of the Mons-Condé canal, remained relatively tranquil. As de Lisle relates: "we had a peaceful time till the afternoon," when a small detachment of German forces attempted to cross the canal. This effort failed, and subsequent reports of German crossings on the division's front proved to be false. The Cavalry Division thus remained in position until the evening, when a message was received from 5 Division on the immediate right, stating that 3 Division was retreating and that the canal line had thus become untenable. Conforming to the movements of the rest of the BEF, the cavalry began to retire southwards at 9 P.M.³⁸ While its beginnings were less than frenzied for the Cavalry Division, the "Great Retreat" was underway.

The Retreat from Mons and the Unraveling of the Cavalry Division 24–25 August

After moving south for three hours, all four brigades bivouacked for the night in the vicinity of Quievrain, with orders to send patrols forward to make contact with the enemy at 5 A.M. Still on the left flank of the BEF, the division remained intact and largely unscathed. The cumulative effect of two night marches left it somewhat fatigued, however, just as it would encounter considerable bodies of German forces for the first time. While the previous morning had been peaceful, the cavalry would have no such luck on 24 August. By 6 A.M., troops of de Lisle's 2d Brigade had made contact with the enemy and were in fact being shelled as the Germans bore down on them in significant numbers. After conferring with de Lisle, Allenby decided to withdraw, but there remained the matter of informing 5 Division, whose left flank the cavalry was assigned to

37. Cavalry Division War Diary, 22 August 1914, WO 95/1096; 3d Division War Diary, 22 August 1914, WO 95/1375, PRO. See also, de Lisle, "My Narrative," 22 August 1914.

38. De Lisle, "My Narrative," 23 August 1914; Cavalry Division War Diary, 23 August 1914, WO 95/1096.

cover.³⁹ The commander of the Cavalry Division thus sent three officers off in search of Fergusson, in order to alert him of the cavalry’s intended retreat. Unfortunately, Allenby did not wait for an answer. The Cavalry Division War Diary states that “under the belief that the 5th Division had also commenced its retirement,” the commander ordered the cavalry to retire southwards. The 1st and 2d Brigades began withdrawing in that direction by 6.45 A.M. Both Edmonds and de Lisle, however, maintain that the cavalry commander had received no reply from 5 Division when he initiated the retreat.⁴⁰ By 10.15 it became clear that Allenby’s decision had been premature, as urgent messages began arriving from 5 Division indicating that the withdrawal of the cavalry had left its flank exposed and requesting immediate assistance. Luckily, de Lisle, doubting the wisdom of Allenby’s decision, had exercised his own initiative and left one of his regiments, the 18th Hussars, to act as a rearguard. In addition, when they encountered one of the messengers returning from Fergusson, both de Lisle and Gough decided to halt their brigades until they received further orders.⁴¹ As a result, when instructions arrived from Allenby directing the two brigades to reoccupy their former positions, they were able to do so fairly quickly.

Due to de Lisle’s timely second-guessing of Allenby’s order to retire, the 2d Brigade remained the closest to 5 Division of any of the cavalry brigades. It thus took the lead in plugging the gap which had opened up between the two divisions. Consequently, it also became the first brigade to suffer serious casualties, as the Germans were advancing in force into the breach between the two divisions. The 2d Brigade quickly reoccupied its former position on a ridge just north of the village of Audregnies, just in time to meet a German attack. While he had shown good judgement earlier in the morning, de Lisle acted somewhat hastily in the face of an impending engagement. With lines of enemy infantry visible on the horizon, he soberly informed the commander of the 9th Lancers, Lieutenant Colonel David Campbell, that “the safety of the 5th Division depended on the Cavalry delaying the German attack, and that if necessary he would have to sacrifice his regiment to effect this.”⁴²

As de Lisle later conceded, “I failed to explain my intention as clearly as I should have done.” Unfortunately, his ambiguity had serious consequences for the cohesion of his brigade. Rather than meeting the attack

39. Cavalry Division War Diary, 24 August 1914, WO 95/1096; de Lisle, “My Narrative,” 24 August 1914.

40. Cavalry Division War Diary, 24 August 1914, WO 95/1096; Edmonds, *Military Operations*, 104; de Lisle, “My Narrative,” 24 August 1914.

41. Cavalry Division War Diary, 24 August 1914, WO 95/1096; de Lisle, “My Narrative,” 24 August 1914; Edmonds, *Military Operations*, 107.

42. De Lisle, “My Narrative,” 24 August 1914.

with rifle fire, Campbell interpreted de Lisle's instructions as an opportunity to unleash the *arme blanche*. The 9th Lancers, supported by the 4th Dragoon Guards, thus charged towards the enemy infantry with little artillery support and without the benefit of reconnaissance. While such a measure might have been feasible in South Africa, Campbell's headlong rush under the sights of German artillery, across a field divided by wire fencing, proved disastrous. The Lancers were halted by the wire, suffering 268 casualties from enemy fire before they were able to cut a hasty retreat. After over a decade of debate in peacetime, the first significant cavalry engagement of the war had provided a compelling answer to the question of "shock versus fire" in favour of the latter.⁴³

It should be acknowledged that the charge of the 2d Brigade, strongly supported by the artillery of Gough's 3d Brigade on its left, helped prevent the German infantry from exploiting the gap between the cavalry and 5 Division. By mid-afternoon on the twenty-fourth, when de Lisle located the remains of the 9th Lancers, Fergusson's Division had slipped away to safety. The effects of this first jolt to the Cavalry Division, and to the 2d Brigade especially, were nonetheless traumatic. De Lisle was apparently unruffled, contending: "I felt satisfied that it was well done even if it might have been done with less expense." David Campbell, however, was considerably less sanguine, reporting to advanced GHQ at Bavai later that day that his regiment had been "practically annihilated." This assessment also characterizes the cohesion of the 2d Brigade. According to the divisional War Diary, de Lisle's force was "very much broken up," as it retreated southwards to Ruesnes along with the rest of the Division.⁴⁴

Aside from the 2d Brigade, the Cavalry Division remained largely intact on the night of 24/25 August, billeting in the vicinity of Ruesnes. Over the course of the next day, however, its cohesion would begin to crumble in earnest as fatigue and confusion increased. Orders received from GHQ for the next day did not help in this respect, dividing the shaken division by instructing the 1st and 2d Brigades, under de Lisle, to operate behind II Corps, covering its retreat, while the remainder operated on the left flank under Allenby. Whatever uniformity in the movements of the division this might suggest, it is difficult to impose any order on what resulted. For most of the day, the cavalry moved southwards, engaged in what the *Official History* terms a "running fight" behind the II Corps, whose retreat it was

43. De Lisle, "My Narrative," 24 August 1914; Frederic Coleman, *From Mons to Ypres with French: A Personal Narrative* (Toronto: William Briggs, 1916), 5–6; Hubert Gough, *The Fifth Army* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1931), 17; Edmonds, *Military Operations*, 108–9; Phillip-Howell to Wavell, n.d., Allenby VI/I.

44. De Lisle, "My Narrative," 24 August 1914; Loch Diary, 24 August 1914, Lord Loch Papers, 71/12/1, IWM; Cavalry Division War Diary, 24 August 1914, WO 95/1096.

supposed to be covering.⁴⁵ Allenby’s headquarters remained completely out of touch with GHQ, and repeatedly lost track of its brigades as its system of communications collapsed once the division became separated.⁴⁶ While A. J. Smithers has noted that the Cavalry Division was equipped with a wireless link to GHQ, the Divisional War Diary makes no reference to its use during the retreat. On the contrary, a rather more laborious means of communication prevailed, as both divisional headquarters and the brigades relied on a combination of cars and motorcycles driven by despatch riders to collect and distribute information. In the midst of an unplanned retirement entailing frequent modifications of orders, this system proved largely ineffective, especially given the civilian and military traffic which choked the roads of northern France in this period.⁴⁷ Communications were further impeded by a general shortage of vehicles. As the 2d Cavalry Brigade war diary reflected at the end of August: “The cars from Div[isional] HQ supposed to be allotted to Bdes when detached were never available.” An excerpt from the divisional War Diary captures well the lack of coordination which prevailed on 25 August. In this instance, just after headquarters had changed position: “Cavalry was seen from this point and it was thought at first that this might be [enemy] Cavalry which had been reported by aeroplane. It was found however that this force was the 3rd Cavalry Brigade.”⁴⁸

By late afternoon of the 25th, the general confusion of the retreat had increased as troops of II Corps funnelled towards the town of Le Cateau with German forces hot on their heels. In an effort to avoid the pandemonium of Le Cateau, which had been assigned as the destination of II Corps, Allenby determined to billet to the northwest in the nearby village of Beaumont, but he was unsuccessful in relaying his decision to any of his brigades. As the War Diary states: “Owing to the necessity to cover the infantry it was impossible to give any definite directions in which

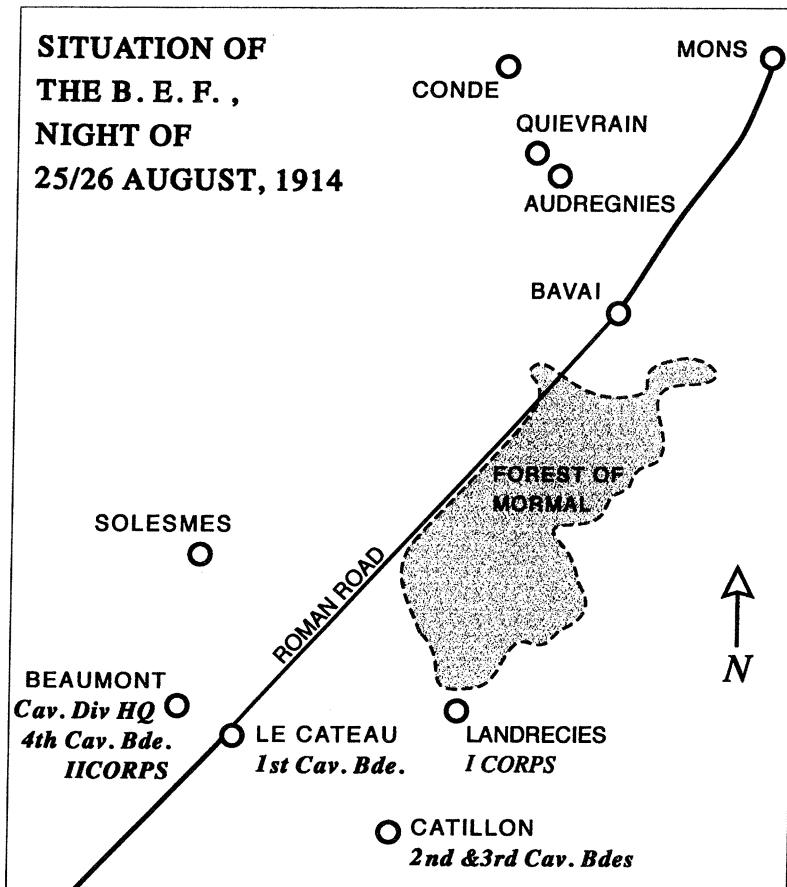
45. Cavalry Division War Diary, 24 August 1914, WO 95/1096; Edmonds, *Military Operations*, 125.

46. Henry Wilson to Thomas Snow, 25 August 1914, Edmonds, 6/2, Edmonds Papers, LHCMA. Wilson, sub-Chief of the General Staff, sent a message to Snow, commander of 4 Division during the afternoon, asking: “Have you any news of the Cavalry Division? We have none.” Neither had 4 Division.

47. A. J. Smithers, *The Man Who Disobeyed: Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien and His Enemies* (London: Leo Cooper, 1970), 165. On the difficulties of conveying information by motor vehicle during the retreat, see Coleman, *From Mons to Ypres With French*; C. D. Baker-Carr, *From Chauffeur to Brigadier-General* (London: Benn, 1930); Edward Spiers, *Liaison 1914: A Narrative of the Great Retreat* (London: Ayre and Spottiswood, 1968), particularly 121–22; A. Rawlinson, *Adventures on the Western Front: August 1914–June 1915* (London: Andrew Melrose, 1925).

48. 2d Cavalry Brigade War Diary, 31 August 1914, WO 95/1110, PRO; Cavalry Division War Diary, 25 August 1914, WO 95/1096.

to concentrate the Division." Amid the disorder of a general retreat, and in the absence of orders from its commander, "[t]he Division, therefore, became separated and broken up."⁴⁹



The dispersal of the Cavalry Division on the night of 25/26 August was an important consideration in the decision of the commander of the II Corps, Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien, to face the Germans at Le Cateau the next morning. At 2 A.M. on the twenty-sixth, Allenby arrived at II Corps Headquarters, where he admitted to its commander that his division was both scattered and exhausted. As a result, the cavalry could not be counted upon to cover the retirement of II Corps the next morning. This revelation, combined with the news that a significant portion

49. Cavalry Division War Diary, 25 August 1914, WO 95/1096.

of Smith-Dorrien’s force would be unable to march until well after day-break, induced the II Corps commander to stand his ground against the approaching enemy. The battle that resulted has been treated in greater depth elsewhere.⁵⁰ The whereabouts of the bulk of the Cavalry Division, however, has not. As Allenby explained his dilemma to Smith-Dorrien, the only elements of the cavalry in contact with divisional headquarters were Bingham’s 4th Brigade, and a regiment of the 1st Brigade, who had not been able to locate their commander, Briggs.⁵¹

While the confusion that reigned in the vicinity of Le Cateau on 25 August certainly did not facilitate contact with the remaining brigades, neither did the actions of the other brigadiers. In the late afternoon, de Lisle and Gough arrived in the town with the bulk of the 1st, 2d, and 3d Brigades. As de Lisle relates in his memoirs, the roads were jammed with troops awaiting orders, and the situation promised to become worse as the rest of II Corps and the Cavalry Division converged on Le Cateau. In the absence of any direction from divisional headquarters, the two conferred, deciding to bypass the town. The question remained, however, where to go once this was accomplished, and here the predilection of the two cavalrymen for independent action, combined with their lack of faith in Allenby, emerged to influence their decision. Rather than remaining in the vicinity and continuing to cover II Corps, or attempting to locate the rest of their division, de Lisle and Gough departed immediately in a southeasterly direction, billeting for the night at Catillon, approximately seven miles to the southeast, halfway between Le Cateau and Landrecies, where I Corps of the BEF had halted. The justification for this flight was rather feeble, and not surprisingly, de Lisle attributes the decision to Hubert Gough in his memoirs, stating: “knowing the general situation better than I did, he saw the necessity of connecting between the 1st and 2nd Corps.”⁵²

How this necessity could have become evident to Gough remains a mystery. A significant gap had in fact developed between the two corps of the BEF on 25 August, but this came as a complete surprise to GHQ, II Corps, and certainly the Cavalry Division. While the GHQ Operation Order for 25 August directed the entire BEF to move to the vicinity of Le Cateau, I Corps, misinterpreting orders, had started its march several hours late and halted at Landrecies.⁵³ In the late afternoon, however, only

50. Smith-Dorrien to Archibald Murray, 21 July 1919, “Murray Correspondence,” WO 79/62, PRO. See Terraine, *Mons*, for a detailed and readable account of the battle of Le Cateau.

51. Edmonds, *Military Operations*, 140.

52. De Lisle, “My Narrative,” 25 August 1914.

53. GHQ War Diary, Operation Order No. 7, 24 August 1914, WO 95/1; Loch Diary, 25 August 1914, Loch Papers; Wilson Diary, 25 August 1914, Henry Wilson Papers,

I Corps would have been aware of the distance between the two corps and the need to span it. While Hubert Gough's brother, Johnnie, was chief of staff of I Corps, it is difficult to imagine how the two might have communicated, given the distance between them and the chaos which prevailed. Indeed, contrary to de Lisle's later assertion, the 3d Cavalry Brigade War Diary indicates absolutely no comprehension of the gap on the part of its commander. As the diary states candidly: "not knowing where to go, we went through Le Cateau to Catillon, where we billeted for the night."⁵⁴ In any case, even if de Lisle and Gough had somehow been able to ascertain that the two corps remained separated, their judgement in deserting II Corps while it was closely pursued by the Germans would have been suspect at best.

It must be acknowledged that after nearly four days and nights of nearly continuous movement, much of it with the Germans close on their heels, fatigue was beginning to have a profound effect on officers and men alike. Of the night of 25/26 August, de Lisle recalls:

I remember being more tired that night than on any occasion during this or my previous two wars. We billeted in a miserable estaminet and the woman in charge agreed to make us some soup and coffee. We slept while waiting for this, and I slept between the courses. I even remember being awakened more than once to finish my soup.⁵⁵

It would be overly simplistic, however, to attribute the flight of a significant portion of the Cavalry Division solely to the effects of physical and mental exhaustion. Given the knowledge of the situation that the two brigadiers actually possessed, their decision is only comprehensible within the context of their relations with Allenby, and their own professional outlook. With what little regard de Lisle and Gough had for their

IWM. While the commander of I Corps, Sir Douglas Haig, contended in his diary that he had been instructed to halt at Landrecies, the GHQ Operation Order for 25 August clearly states the intent of Sir John French that the entire Army would move "to a position in the neighbourhood of Le Cateau." The diaries of staff officers at GHQ also register surprise at the fact that I Corps halted at Landrecies. As Loch, a liaison between GHQ and II Corps, writes: "For some reason the I Corps did not march sufficiently early and did not get back to the desired line." Henry Wilson was more forceful, declaring: "Found to my disgust that I Corps were retiring E of Forest of Mormal [and] pulling up with head at Landrecies. This is mad. D. H. says he cannot go any further but he ought to be made to go on to Le Cateau otherwise there will be an awkward gap and tomorrow the II Corps will be unsupported." For a detailed account of the separation of the BEF around the Forest of Mormal, see Nikolas Gardner, "Command in Crisis: The British Expeditionary Force and the Forest of Mormal, August 1914," *War and Society* 16 (October 1998): 13–32.

54. 3d Cavalry Brigade War Diary, 25 August 1914, WO 95/1130, PRO. See also, Gough, *The Fifth Army*, 26.

55. De Lisle, "My Narrative," 25 August 1914.

commander eroded by his performance during the retreat, their predilection for independent decision making emerged, manifesting itself in their decision to move southeast without reference to the rest of the Cavalry Division while German forces converged from the north on II Corps at Le Cateau. Thus, by the evening of 25 August, the division had become dispersed. Divisional headquarters at Beaumont was in contact with Bingham's 4th Brigade and remained in communication with II Corps in the vicinity of Le Cateau. Elements of the 1st Brigade remained in the area as well, unbeknownst to Allenby. Meanwhile, however, the 2d and 3d Brigades, along with the remainder of the 1st Brigade, had departed to the vicinity of Catillon, well out of reach of divisional headquarters. On the eve of the most important battle of the retreat, the Cavalry Division had effectively come unravelled.

Gough's Flight to I Corps and the End of the Cavalry Division 26–31 August

The battle of Le Cateau, which took place the next morning, was certainly a pivotal engagement for the BEF. Due to its disintegration the previous day, however, the Cavalry Division made almost no contribution. Bingham's 4th Brigade, which remained with the commander, attempted to cover the retreat of II Corps during the afternoon, but even in this respect Allenby's contribution was limited. He in fact refused a request to cooperate with 4 Division at 11.15 A.M., informing its commander: “I am afraid I cannot intervene effectively in the fight,” due to the paucity of troops at hand. For most of the day, the whereabouts of any cavalry remained an enigma to even the headquarters of II Corps, under whose orders Allenby had placed the entire division. During the afternoon, Edmonds, then chief staff officer of 4th Division, visited the II Corps Chief of Staff, Brigadier-General George Forestier-Walker, and inquired as to the whereabouts of the cavalry. Forestier-Walker could only reply, “I wish to God we knew.”⁵⁶

The rest of the Cavalry Division remained scattered, taking little part in the battle, and apparently taking no initiative to locate divisional headquarters. Briggs had bivouacked with elements of his 1st Brigade southeast of Le Cateau the previous night, but he was unable to locate either the rest of his troops or divisional headquarters the next day.⁵⁷ De Lisle and Gough remained off to the right of II Corps, ostensibly plugging the gap

56. Edmonds to Wavell, 18 June 1938; Edmonds to Wavell, 22 June 1938, Allenby VII.

57. Cavalry Division War Diary, 26 August 1914, WO 95/1096. On this date the diary contains no references to any brigade besides Bingham's. Edmonds, *Military Operations*, 137.

between it and I Corps. In this locale, they made little contribution to the British effort at Le Cateau. The commander of the 2d Brigade's summation of its role on the twenty-sixth is sufficiently clear, as he states: "Being in reserve that day my Brigade was not engaged."⁵⁸ Hubert Gough's force was only slightly more effective. During the morning, the 3d Brigade stumbled accidentally into the battle on the right flank of II Corps. From hastily selected positions, two guns of the brigade's battery shelled the attacking Germans until early afternoon, aiding the embattled infantry on its left. Gough's continued independence inhibited his contribution to the British effort, however, as he apparently did not make contact with adjacent units. As a result, he had little idea of the broader course of the battle, and inadvertently withdrew his force at a critical moment. As he reflected after the war, "[t]he position I held was . . . important to the right flank of the II Corps, but unfortunately, owing to my entire ignorance of the situation, I did not hold it as long as I might have done." The 3d Cavalry Brigade retired to the southeast at approximately 1.30 P.M., leaving the right flank of II Corps exposed. Shortly afterwards, German pressure on this flank necessitated the withdrawal of Smith-Dorrien's force.⁵⁹ Thus, even Gough's 3d Brigade, which was present at a pivotal point of the battle, made little contribution to the engagement at Le Cateau. While II Corps fought desperately, the independent behaviour of Allenby's brigadiers left the Cavalry Division largely unable to assist.

The battle of Le Cateau threw II Corps into disarray for several days afterwards. It effectively marked a turning point in the retreat, however, as von Kluck, commanding the German First Army, directed his cavalry to advance to the southwest, on the mistaken assumption that the British army was retiring in that direction. Consequently, the beleaguered British army enjoyed several days of relatively undisturbed retirement. Notwithstanding this respite, however, the Cavalry Division did not regain its cohesion. The stress of continued retreat, combined with the trauma of losing control over their brigades, had taken its toll on Allenby and his staff. It was in many ways fortunate that the pressure of the German pursuit eased following Le Cateau, as apparently Vaughan had succumbed to exhaustion and "gone to pieces" by 26 August. As John Shea, a staff officer at GHQ in 1914, recounted:

I was giving a message to Allenby on the 3rd day of the retreat and suddenly looked up and saw John Vaughan's face. I remember it clearly

58. De Lisle, "My Narrative," 26 August 1914.

59. Gough, *The Fifth Army*, 28; Beddington Memoir, cited in Victor Bonham-Carter, *The Strategy of Victory, 1914–1918: The Life and Times of the Master Strategist of the First World War: Field-Marshal Sir William Robertson* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, Winston, 1963), 92; II Corps War Diary, 26 August 1914, WO 95/630, PRO.

because it was such a shock to me to think that this much admired cavalryman was completely useless. . . .”⁶⁰

Even before Vaughan’s collapse, it is likely that his utter inexperience in staff work contributed to the lack of control which had prevailed since the twenty-fifth. Luckily, Allenby had at hand a more durable replacement in the resourceful George Barrow, the divisional intelligence officer. It is difficult to judge whether Barrow proved any more effective than his predecessor, however, as communications remained handicapped by the congestion and disorder which prevailed as II Corps retreated southwards. Even more important in undermining the cohesion of the division, however, was the continued independence of Briggs, de Lisle, and above all, Hubert Gough. The Cavalry Division War Diary gives no indication of contact with the 1st, 2d, or 3d Brigade on 27 August. Briggs apparently continued to retreat independently, while de Lisle indicates that he made an effort to locate the rest of the cavalry until he received orders from II Corps to help cover its retreat.⁶¹ This put an end to his attempts to communicate with Allenby.

While the other brigades had at least remained in general proximity to II Corps and thus to one another, by 27 August Gough had effectively removed the 3d Brigade from the Cavalry Division. After making limited efforts to support II Corps on the morning of the twenty-sixth, Gough veered eastwards in search of Haig’s I Corps, despite having received an order to rejoin the rest of the cavalry in the opposite direction. In his memoir of the war, the commander of the 3d Brigade defended his decision by referring to his telephone conversation with the sub-Chief of Staff at GHQ, Henry Wilson, on the evening of 26 August. After receiving Wilson’s unhelpful instruction to “do what you like, old boy!”, Gough contended that he departed in hopes of obtaining more explicit instructions from Haig.⁶²

In reality, however, Gough’s motives were less ingenuous. Phillip Chetwode, commanding the 5th Cavalry Brigade under I Corps, encountered the 3d Cavalry Brigade on 27 August in the gap between the two corps. When the surprised Chetwode enquired as to what he was doing so far from the rest of his division when II Corps remained in serious trouble, Gough replied that he was “getting as far away from the Bull [Allenby] as possible.” Nor did he intend to return, as Gough admitted to John Shea the next day that “he had ridden away on purpose and did not mean to

60. John Shea to Wavell, 8 December 1938, Allenby VII; see also Barrow to Wavell, n.d., Allenby VI.

61. Cavalry Division War Diary, 27 August 1914, WO 95/1096; de Lisle, “My Narrative,” 27 August 1914.

62. Gough, *The Fifth Army*, 26–31.

go back.”⁶³ Such an escapade would have seen most officers sent back to England, but the 3d Brigade commander had the personal connections to back up his temerity. In addition to the fact that his brother was Chief of Staff to I Corps, Hubert Gough also enjoyed the friendship of Haig and French, both of whom proved amenable to his suggestion that he attach himself to I Corps on 27 August.⁶⁴ Thus, while the commanders of the 1st and 2d Brigades had returned to the fold by 29 August after regaining contact with divisional headquarters, Gough never came back, despite receiving repeated orders from Allenby to rejoin the division. On 31 August, GHQ Operation Order No. 13 placed his 3d Brigade under the command of I Corps, a development which came as a surprise to the rest of the Cavalry Division, including its commander.⁶⁵ While in the divisional War Diary, Gough’s transfer passed without comment, it effectively marked the end of the first incarnation of the Cavalry Division. In the final stages of the retreat before the BEF turned and advanced on 6 September, Allenby retained control over the 1st, 2d, and 4th Brigades, while Gough took command of his and Phillip Chetwode’s 5th Brigade. In late September, the separation of the original Cavalry Division, which had existed in reality since shortly after the beginning of the retreat, was made official, as the two sections were designated the 1st and 2d Cavalry Divisions respectively.

Conclusion

The “Great Retreat” of 1914 subjected the British Expeditionary Force to tremendous physical and mental stress. Soldiers’ accounts of this period refer repeatedly to their fatigue and disorientation as the army retreated day after day without significant pause, stopping only to lash out at the German forces on their heels. Disorder was intensified by the fact that communications were impeded seriously by the civilian and military traffic blocking the roads of northern France. Under these circumstances, maintaining cohesion was difficult enough, especially for the Cavalry Division, which possessed considerably greater mobility than the infantry and thus was expected to span a significant area in covering the rest of the army.

63. Phillip Chetwode to Wavell, 20 June 1938; Shea to Wavell, 8 December 1938, Allenby VI/I.

64. Barrow to Wavell, n.d., Allenby VI/I. As Barrow states: “Had he not been *persona grata* with French & Haig he would have been sent straight back to England.” See also, Gough, *The Fifth Army*, 33–34.

65. 3d Cavalry Brigade War Diary, August 1914, WO 95/1130; GHQ War Diary, Operation Order No. 13, 31 August 1914, WO 95/1.

The strain of the retreat was compounded by the inexperience of the divisional staff, and the size of the division itself. In the confusion which prevailed, it proved impossible for the staff, none of whom had experience handling such a large formation in the field, to maintain contact with all four brigades. Conversely, none of the brigades had ever operated in a division, and it is unlikely that they did their utmost to keep in touch with one another, or divisional headquarters. Nor did the brigadiers’ dislike of Allenby help in this respect.

Underlying these difficulties, and the way in which officers dealt with them, was the professional outlook of the cavalry. Examining the years immediately before the war, scholars have acknowledged the predilection of most cavalrymen for shock tactics. In August 1914 this inclination was manifested both in the cumbersome size of the division and, on at least one occasion, in a disastrous charge under the sights of German artillery. While the attack of the 9th Lancers certainly had an impact on the cohesion of the 2d Brigade, the cavalry’s affection for the *arme blanche* was not instrumental in the disintegration of the division. Alongside this attachment to shock tactics, the ethos of the British cavalry emphasized intuitive decision making and independence from higher command, while holding strict adherence to orders in little regard. In the midst of the retreat, this philosophy surfaced as brigade commanders often found themselves in unanticipated situations while out of contact with Allenby and his headquarters. Admittedly, it was the responsibility of divisional headquarters to maintain contact with the brigades, and Allenby’s staff were unable to do so, given the system of communications which prevailed. The brigadiers, however, did nothing to ease this task. On the contrary, they repeatedly took the initiative, operating independently rather than attempting to gain contact with their commander. Both Briggs and de Lisle demonstrated little concern for the whereabouts of the rest of the division following its dispersal on 25 August. Hubert Gough, however, took this emphasis on independence to the extreme, fleeing the chaos of Le Cateau and leaving the division entirely without so much as consulting Allenby. In many situations operational flexibility no doubt can be advantageous, but in August 1914 it proved fatal to the cohesion of the Cavalry Division. As one staff officer remarked after the war: “The Division was never a unit, it was a Collection of Brigades.”⁶⁶ This lack of unity in turn threatened the entire BEF. At Le Cateau on 26 August, Allenby was unable to assist II Corps in the battle, as a large component of his division had removed itself from the action. It was in many ways fortunate that the subsequent German pursuit went awry, as Allenby’s brigades made no great effort to connect with him in the days that followed, and the performance of the

66. Phillip-Howell to Wavell, 20 July 1938, Allenby VI/I.

cavalry as a covering force for the retiring BEF was inhibited seriously. Thus, despite the tactical proficiency of the cavalry, its lack of unity in August 1914 robbed it of much of its effectiveness. Ultimately, the dearth of experience of the cavalry in operating as a division, its unwieldy size, the inefficiency of its commander and staff, and the independent mindset of its officers left it ill-prepared for the exigencies of the “Great Retreat.”